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Phillips, Stephen  
Christ in Hades

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CRIST·IN·HADES·ETC  
V·STEPHEN·PHILLIPS

*kin matthews' shilling garland*





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# CHRIST IN HADES

AND OTHER POEMS BY  
STEPHEN PHILLIPS

LONDON  
ELKIN MATHEWS, VIGO STREET  
1896

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TO  
FRANK BENSON  
I DEDICATE  
THIS BOOK





# CHRIST IN HADES

## A PHANTASY

KEEN as a blinded man, at dawn awake,  
Smells in the dark the cold odour of earth ;  
Eastward he turns his eyes, and over him  
A dreadful freshness exquisitely breathes ;  
The room is brightening, even his own face !  
So the excluded ghosts in Hades felt  
A waft of early sweet, and heard the rain  
Of Spring beginning over them ; they all  
Stood still, and in each other's faces looked.  
And restless grew their queen Persephone ;  
Who, like a child, dreading to be observed  
By awful Dis, threw little glances down  
Toward them, and understood them with her  
eyes.

Perpetual dolour had as yet but drooped  
The corners of her mouth ; and in her hand  
She held a bloom that had on earth a name.

Quickly she whispered: "Come, my Hermes,  
come!

'Tis time to fetch me! Ah, through all my  
veins

The sharpness of the spring returns: I hear  
The stalk revive with sap, and the first drops  
On green illumined grass; now over me  
The blades are growing fast; I cannot rest.  
He comes, he comes! Yet with how slow a step,  
Who used to run along a sunny gust!  
And O a withered wreath! no roses now  
Dewy from paradise. Surely not his  
Those earnest eyes, that ragged hair; his face  
Was glad and cold. This is no god at all,  
Only some grieving human shade, with hands  
Unsightly, and the eager Furies wheel  
Over him!" Slowly to her side her arms  
Had fallen; Christ with grave eyes looks on her.  
Her young mouth trembled fast, and from her  
hand

With serious face she let the earthly flower  
Drop down; then, stretching out her arms, she  
said:

"O all fresh out of beautiful sunlight!  
Thine eyes are still too dazed to see us clear.  
Was it not difficult to come away  
Straight from the greenness to the dimness?

Now

It is the time of tender, opening things.  
Above my head the fields murmur and wave,

And breezes are just moving the clear heat.  
O the mid-noon is trembling on the corn,  
On cattle calm, and trees in perfect sleep.  
And hast thou empty come? Hast thou not  
brought

Even a blossom with the noise of rain  
And smell of earth about it, that we all  
Might gather round and whisper over it?  
At one wet blossom all the dead would feel!  
O thou beginning to glide here a shadow,  
Soon shalt thou know how much it seems to us,  
In miserable dim magnificence,  
To feel the snowdrop growing over us!  
That barren crown! but now it was a wreath.  
These gusts of Hell have blown it into thorn!  
If thou canst bear it yet, O speak to me  
Of the blue noon, of breezes and of rivers!"

A wonderful stillness stopped her; like to trees  
Motionless in an ecstasy of rain,  
So the tall dead stood drooping around Christ,  
Under the falling peace intensely still;  
And some in slow delight their faces raised  
Upwards; but soon, like leaves, duly released,  
Tormented phantoms, ancient injured shades,  
Sighing began downward to drift and glide  
Toward him, and unintelligibly healed  
Lingered, with closing eyes and parting lips.  
Agamemnon bowed over, and from his wheel  
Ixion staggered to his feet all blind.

Over the head of Jesus the whole sky  
Of pain began to drive: old punishments  
Diswreathing drooped, and legendary dooms  
Dispersing hung, and lurid history streamed.  
But he against that flying sky remained  
Placid with power; in silence stood the dead,  
Gazing; only was heard that river steal,  
The listless ripple of Oblivion.

Then an Athenian ghost stood out and spoke.  
"I fear to speak to thee, while these my eyes  
Behold our great life interrupted pause.  
That was our sky, that passes: and I miss  
The busy sound of water, and of stone;  
And sorrows that we thought perpetual  
I see suspended, and amid them thee  
Gentle, and all injured. Art thou a god  
Easily closing all these open eyes,  
And hast not spoken word? Thou hast not  
played

Monotonously as rain, inducing sleep:  
Thou comest without lute, yet hast thou power  
To charm the fixed melancholy of spirits?  
Art thou a god? Then guide us to the air,  
To trees and rivers, that peculiar light  
Which even now is squandered on the beasts.  
Canst thou not make the primrose venture up  
Or bring the gentlest shower? O pity us;  
For I would ask of thee only to look  
Upon the wonderful sunlight, and to smell  
Earth in the rain. Is not the labourer,

Returning heavy through the August sheaves  
Against the setting sun, who gladly smells  
His supper from the opening door, is he  
Not happier than these melancholy kings?  
How good it is to live, even at the worst!  
God was so lavish to us once, but here  
He hath repented, jealous of his beams.  
Just as a widower, that dreaming holds  
His dead wife in his arms, not wondering,  
So natural it appears; then starting up  
With trivial words, or even with a jest,  
Realises all the uncoloured dawn,  
And near his head the young bird in the leaves  
Stirring; not less, not otherwise do we  
Want in this colourless country the warm earth.  
Yet how shall we in thy tormented face  
Believe? Thou comest from the glistening sun  
As out of some great battle, nor hast thou  
The beautiful ease of the untroubled gods.  
Most strong are they, for they are joyous cold.  
Thou art not happy! We can trust thee not.  
How wilt thou lead with feet already pierced?  
And if we ask thy hand, see, it is torn!"

But when he had spoken, Christ no answer made.  
Upon his hands in uncouth gratitude  
Great prisoners muttering fawned: behind them  
stood  
Dreadful suspended business, and vast life  
Pausing, dismantled piers, and naked frames.

And further, shapes from obscure troubles loosed,  
Like mist descended: on the horizon last,  
The piled tremendous firmament collapsed,  
With dazzling pains, and solemn sorrows white.

Then stole a woman up to him, and said :  
"Although I know thee not, yet can I tell  
That only a great love hath brought thee hither.  
Didst thou so ail in brightness, and couldst not  
rest

For thinking of some woman? Was thy bed  
So empty, cold thy hearth, and aimless glides  
Thy wife amidst us? Whom then dost thou  
seek?

For see, we are so changed: thou wouldst not  
know

The busy form that moved about thy fire.  
She has no occupation, and no care,  
No little tasks. O we had pleasant homes.  
And often we remember husbands dear,  
That were most kind, and wonder after them.  
My little children! Who sings to them now?  
Return then to the earth! Thou canst not fetch  
Thy drooping listless woman to the air.  
Thou'lt have no comfort out of her at all.  
Yet say, perhaps thou hast but lately died,  
And wanderest here unburied? Restless seem  
Those eyes; ah, on thy body thou dost feel  
The bird settling? Hath no friend covered up  
Thy limbs, or do they fall with falling waves?"

But one broke in on her with eager words.  
"See how we live along exhausted streams,  
Eluding forests, and dispersing hills;  
O but I gloried and drank and wept and laughed!  
Give me again great life! To dare, to enjoy,  
To explore, never to tire, to be alive,  
And full of blood, and young, to risk, to love!  
The bright glory of after-battle wine,  
The flushed recounting faces, the stern hum  
Of burnished armies, thrill of unknown seas!"  
As he was speaking, slowly all the dead  
The melancholy attraction of Jesus felt;  
And millions, like a sea, wave upon wave,  
Heaved dreaming to that moonlight face, or ran  
In wonderful long ripples, sorrow-charmed.  
Toward him in faded purple, pacing came  
Dead emperors, and sad unflattered kings;  
Unlucky captains listless armies led;  
Poets with music frozen on their lips,  
Toward the pale Brilliance sighed; until at last  
Antiquity, like evening gathering,  
With mild and starry faces, gradually  
Had stolen up. Glimmering all the dead  
Looked upon Jesus; as they stood, some thought  
Spread from the furthest edges like a breeze,  
Till like a leafy forest, the huge host  
Whispered together, bending all one way  
Toward him; and then ensued a stillness deep.  
But suddenly the form of Jesus stirred;  
And all the dead stirred with him suddenly.



He shuddered in a rapture; and from his eyes  
They felt returning agonies of hope.  
As men, flame-wrapped, hither and thither run,  
To rid them, or fall headlong to the ground;  
The dead, caught in intolerable hope,  
Hither and hither burning rushed, or fell  
Imploring him to leave them cold; but Christ  
Came through them: leading irresistibly  
Not western spirits alone: but all that world  
Was up! and after him in passion swept  
Dead Asia, murmuring, and the buried North!

But in his path a lonely spirit stood;  
A Roman, he who from a greater Greek  
Borrowed as beautifully as the moon  
The fire of the sun: fresh come he was, and still  
Deaf with the sound of Rome: forward he came  
Softly; a human tear had not yet dried.  
“Whither,” he said, “O whither dost thou lead  
In such a calm all these embattled dead?  
Almost I could begin to sing again,  
To see these nations burning run through Hell,  
Magnificently anguished, by the grave  
Untired; and this last March against the Powers.  
Who would more gladly follow thee than I?  
But over me the human trouble comes.  
Dear gladiator pitted against Fate,  
I fear for thee: around thee is the scent  
Of over-beautiful, quick-fading things,  
The pang, the gap, the briefness, all the dew,



Tremble, and suddenness of earth : I must  
Remember young men dead in their hot bloom,  
The sweetness of the world edged like a sword,  
The melancholy knocking of those waves,  
The deep unhappiness of winds, the light  
That comes on things we never more shall see.  
Yet I am thrilled : thou seemest like the bourne  
Of all our music, of the hinting night,  
Of souls under the moonlight opening.”  
Now after speaking, he bowed down his head,  
Faltered, and shed wet tears in the vain place.  
And Christ half turned, and with grave, open eyes,  
Looked on him : but behind there was a sound  
Of vast impatience, and the murmurous chafe  
Of captains sick for war ; and poets shone  
All dreaming bright, and fiery prophets, seized  
With gladness, boded splendid things ; and scarred  
Heroes, as desperate men, that see no path,  
Yet follow a riddled memorable flag,  
Pressed close upon that leader world-engraved.  
But he began to pace with slower step,  
With wandering gaze, still hesitating more ;  
Then stayed, and on his last foot strongly leaned.

Faintly the air bore to him blood he knew.  
His gentle eyes hither and thither roved.  
The Furies rose ejaculating fast,  
And circled nearer o’er the limitless dead,  
Who paused, all whispering : before them hung  
Still unredeemed Prometheus from his crag ;

His limbs impaled : then stood the Son of Man,  
And seemed almost about to speak ; the dead  
In silence upward gazed. The Titan's face  
Through passing storms leaps out in dazzling  
pain

Momently on them, and his tone returns  
Fitfully through the gusting hurricane.

“ Stay, mighty dreamer, though thou comest on  
Attracting all the dead, to thy deep charm  
Resigned and bright ; yet stay, and look on me !  
Do I not trouble thee ? Dost thou not swerve  
Smelling my kindred blood on the great track ?  
Full in thy path I menace. After me  
Canst thou go on ? ” The storm carried his voice  
From them, and veiled with rushing hail his face.  
Then many unbound heroes toward him ran,  
Going with great dumb gestures between him  
And Christ ; and in their leader's face looked up  
Beseeching him their brother to release ;  
Then they refrained, all motionless : and now  
The Titan bowed, coming upon them, and seemed  
Falling to carry with him all the crag  
Down on them : over the dead host he cried :  
“ Lo all these ancient prisoners released !  
Did I not feel them everywhere come down  
Easily from immortal torment ? yet  
I, I alone, while all came down from woe,  
Still striving, could not wrench away these limbs.  
O Christ, canst thou a nail move from these feet,  
Thou who art standing in such love of me ?

Thy hands are too like mine to undo these bonds,  
Brother, although the dead world follow thee,  
Deep-fascinated: love hath marred us both,  
And one yearning, as wide as is the world.  
O how thy power leaves thee at this cross!  
Prepare thee for the anguish! Thou shalt know  
Trouble so exquisite, that from his wheel  
Happy Ixion shall spare tears for thee;  
And thou shalt envy me my shadowy crag  
And softly-feeding vulture. Thou shalt stand  
Gazing for ever on the earth, and watch  
How fast thy words incarnadine the world!  
That I know all things is my torment; nothing,  
That ever shall befall, to me is new:  
Already I have suffered it far-off;  
And on the mind the poor event appears  
The pale reflexion of some ancient pang.  
Yet I foresee dim comfort, and discern  
A bleak magnificence of endless hope.  
It seems that even thy woe shall have an end.  
It comes upon thee! O prepare thee; ah,  
That wailing, those young cries, this smouldering  
smell!  
I see the dreadful look of men unborn.  
What hast thou said, that all the air is blood?"

He cried with nostril shuddering fast; and Christ  
Moved to unbind him; but with arm outstretched  
Suddenly stood. A scene unrolling stayed  
Him who had easily released the dead.

He knew that for a time the great advance  
He must delay, postponing our desire.  
The earth again he sees, and all mankind  
Half in the shining sun upright, and half  
Reposing in the shadow; deserts and towns,  
And cloudy mountains and the trembling sea,  
And all the deeds done; and the spoken words  
Distinct he hears: the human history  
Before his eyes defiles in bright sunbeams,  
An endless host parading past; whom he,  
Their leader mild, remorsefully reviewed,  
And had no joy in them, although aloud  
They cried his name, and with fierce faces glad  
Looked up to him for praise, all murmuring proud,  
And bloody trophies toward him flourished and  
waved:

But as he stood, gazing, from time to time  
He seemed to swerve, as though his hand grew  
red,  
Or move, as though to interrupt some sight.

Now when the dead saw that he must not stir,  
Absorbed, with wonder gathering in his eyes,  
They came about him, touching him, and some  
Reminded him, and looked into his face.  
Others in patience laid them down, or fell  
To calling him sweet earthly names: at last  
Waiting the signal that he could not give,  
Wanting the one word that he might not speak,  
Seeing he stirred not once, they wandered off,

And gathering into groups, yet spoke of him ;  
Then to despair slowly dispersed, as men  
Return with morning to the accustomed task.  
And as without some theatre, so friend  
Waited for friend, and speaking of that scene,  
Into the ancient sorrow walked away.  
Yet many could not, after such a sight,  
At once retire, but must from time to time  
Linger with undetermining bright eyes.  
Now at each parting way some said farewell,  
And each man took his penance up, perhaps  
Less easily from such an interval :  
The vault closed back, woe upon woe, the wheel  
Revolved, the stone rebounded ; for that time  
Hades her interrupted life resumed.



# Lyrics





I

O to recall !  
 What to recall ?  
 All the roses under snow ?  
     Not these.  
 Stars that toward the water go ?  
     Not these.

O to recall !  
 What to recall ?  
 All the greenness after rain ?  
     Not this.  
 Joy that gleameth after pain ?  
     Not this.

O to recall !  
 What to recall ?  
 Not the greenness nor delight,  
     Not these ;  
 Not the roses out of sight,  
     Not these.

O to recall !  
 What to recall ?  
 Not the star in waters red,  
     Not this :  
 Laughter of a girl that's dead,  
     O this !

## II

I IN the greyness rose ;  
I could not sleep for thinking of one dead.  
Then to the chest I went,  
Where lie the things of my beloved spread.

Quietly these I took ;  
A little glove, a sheet of music torn,  
Paintings, ill-done perhaps ;  
Then lifted up a dress that she had worn.

And now I came to where  
Her letters are ; they lie beneath the rest ;  
And read them in the haze ;  
She spoke of many things, was sore opprest.

But these things moved me not ;  
Not when she spoke of being parted quite,  
Or being misunderstood,  
Or growing weary of the world's great fight.

Not even when she wrote  
Of our dead child, and the hand-writing swerved ;  
Not even then I shook :  
Not even by such words was I unnerved.

I thought, she is at peace ;  
Whither the child is gone, she too has passed.  
And a much needed rest  
Is fallen upon her, she is still at last.

But when at length I took  
From under all those letters one small sheet,  
Folded and writ in haste ;  
Why did my heart with sudden sharpness beat ?

Alas, it was not sad !  
Her saddest words I had read calmly o'er.  
Alas, it had no pain !  
Her painful words, all these I knew before.

A hurried happy line !  
A little jest, too slight for one so dead :  
This did I not endure :  
Then with a shuddering heart no more I read.

## III

O THOU art put to many uses, sweet !  
Thy blood will urge the rose, and surge in Spring ;  
But yet ! . . .

And all the blue of thee will go to the sky,  
And all thy laughter to the rivers run ;  
But yet ! . . .

Thy tumbling hair will in the West be seen,  
And all thy trembling bosom in the dawn ;  
But yet ! . . .

Thy briefness in the dewdrop shall be hung,  
And all the frailness of thee on the foam ;  
But yet ! . . .

Thy soul shall be upon the moonlight spent,  
Thy mystery spread upon the evening mere.  
And yet ! . . .

# The Apparition



## I

My dead Love came to me, and said:

“God gives me one hour’s rest,  
To spend upon the earth with thee:  
How shall we spend it best?”

“Why as of old,” I said, and so  
We quarrelled as of old.

But when I turned to make my peace,  
That one short hour was told.

## II

NINE nights she did not come to me:  
The heaven was filled with rain;  
And as it fell, and fell, I said,  
“She will not come again.”

Last night she came, not as before,  
But in a strange attire;  
Weary she seemed, and very faint,  
As though she came from fire.



## III

SHE is not happy! It was noon;  
The sun fell on my head:  
And it was not an hour in which  
We think upon the dead.

She is not happy! I should know  
Her voice, much more her cry;  
And close beside me a great rose  
Had just begun to die.

She is not happy! As I walked,  
Of her I was aware:  
She cried out, like a creature hurt,  
Close by me in the air.

## IV

UNDER the trembling summer stars,  
I turned from side to side ;  
When she came in and sat with me,  
As though she had not died.

And she was kind to me and sweet,  
She had her ancient way ;  
Remembered how I liked her hand  
Amid my hair to stray.

She had forgotten nothing, yet  
Older she seemed, and still :  
All quietly she took my kiss,  
Even as a mother will.

She rose, and in the streak of dawn  
She turned as if to go :  
But then again came back to me ;  
My eyes implored her so !

She pushed the hair from off my brow,  
And looked into my eyes.  
“I live in calm,” she said, “and there  
Am learning to be wise.”

“Why grieveest thou ? I pity thee  
Still turning on this bed.”  
“And art thou happy ?” I exclaimed.  
“Alas !” she sighed, and fled.

## V

I WOKE : she had been standing by,  
With wonder on her face.  
She came toward me, very bright,  
As from a blessed place.

She touched me not, but smiling spoke,  
And softly as before.

“ They gave me drink from some slow stream ;  
I love thee now no more.”

## VI

THE other night she hurried in,  
Her face was wild with fear:  
“ Old friend,” she said, “ I am pursued,  
May I take refuge here ? ”

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